

READ OR STONE

BY RONALD KNOX

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Bread or Stone



Abba Pater

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Four Conferences on Impetrative Prayer

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Abba Pater

IN THESE FOUR CONFERENCE I want to speak about the doctrines which underlie the practice known as impetrative prayer—prayer, that is, which is directed in the first instance, not towards the discipline of our own souls in a particular attitude, or the enjoyment of union with God, but towards the obtaining of special favours from him, whether for ourselves or for others. It is important that we should think about these, partly because at the present moment we are all using more prayer than before, and more of this kind of prayer than of any other, partly because the subject is in reality very baffling, and there is great danger of intellectual doubt confusing and disturbing our inter-

cessions, partly because it is a subject on which most people are either too muddled or too timid to speak.

It is a baffling subject. The prayer of acts can easily be shown to be in accordance with the best principles of psychology: the prayer of quiet is admired even by people who don't believe in Christianity, and don't in the least understand what it means: there are plenty of Buddhists now. But, like the Buddhists, and unlike the Mahometans, most of our countrymen do not believe in impetrative prayer, even when they practise it. We are taught it at our mother's knee, and it all seems quite simple then: we go on with it, by force of habit, and gradually cease to reflect whether we expect an answer to it or not. And then suddenly the pinch comes; the father, his knees still aching from the unwonted vigil, stares into the face of his dead child: the farmer, his crops ruined, lifts up a wisp of hay towards heaven on a pitchfork, and asks, "O God, do you call *that* a harvest?" And

then—then they begin to wonder. And they apply to the clergy for an explanation, and for some reason the only explanation the clergy of to-day can give them, is that “Prayer is such a help.” “But I’ve been on my knees night and day for weeks, and nothing’s come of it.” Yes, but prayer is such a help. “But how can God *grant* prayers? Does he make up his mind as he goes along? And how can he grant some people’s prayers, without refusing others’? I can’t understand.” No, no more can I, but you can’t deny that prayer is a help. “But how can prayer be any *use*, when the same sorrowful Mother hears the rosaries of Rouen and Dublin being told with opposite intentions to the rosaries of Vienna and Cologne?” Well, certainly it’s curious—but then, prayer is such a help. You know, that isn’t what Jesus Christ said. Jesus Christ said, “If two or three of you shall agree as touching anything that ye ask it shall be done for them.” Jesus Christ said, “Ask, and ye shall receive.” Jesus Christ

said, "If ye had faith as a grain of mustard seed, ye might say unto this sycamine tree, Be thou plucked up, and be thou planted in the sea, and it should obey you."

Let us try to get to grips with the matter a little closer than that. Let us go to the fountain-head of all devotion. Let us hide behind the olive-trees, and listen to Jesus Christ at prayer.

Abba, Father. It is the Son of God who speaks: the express image of his Person, the heir to all the worlds, existing in his own right, yet drawing his existence from that Fount of Godhead which belongs to the Father alone. But he speaks also as Man, as one of ourselves. What do we mean when we call God "Father"? First, doubtless, that he called us into being. Now, don't let us go off throwing our hats up into the air over that. He called us into being, for his own good pleasure, without consulting us, without giving us the option of not being. Our ancestors used to be grateful to their fathers for the gift of life: not so the

degenerate of the modern drama: "What right had you," he says to his father, "to bring me into existence, to make me heir to all the frailties of the flesh, to expose me to all the buffets of circumstance, without asking my leave?" And it is a terrible responsibility:—that a man and a woman should conjure up between them a third human personality, into which God will breathe a living soul, a soul that will struggle, will sin, will love, will suffer, will, perhaps, go to Hell. Now, God is your Father in the sense that he is responsible both for your body and for your soul; he is the source of all life; he created the damned souls. He is our Father in that sense first.

Well, of course it is a conceivable hypothesis that God is not good. That he created us for a whim, a mere caprice, and having created us, leaves us to fend for ourselves, like an earthly father who is ashamed of his own flesh and blood, and will make no provision for it. Perhaps that, after all, is the secret of existence;

perhaps we are merely God's playthings; our varying fortunes diversify his world, our varying characters lend it colour, and Long John Silver is no less necessary to the plot than Captain Smollett. Or perhaps he is not really interested at all, and having once created us, puts us out to school with Nature, the unkindly nurse who buffets us, heals us again, leads us on, dashes us to the ground, fools us to the top of our bent, and then, when she has no further use for us, throws us on to the dust-heap—perhaps God has no hand in it at all. Or perhaps we are pawns in some great game, far beyond our human comprehension, gigantic issues hang upon our actions, great expectations depend upon us, but not our issues, not our expectations, quite unconnected, it may be, with this one insignificant planet: we are coral insects, building up with frantic endeavour the groundwork for some supermundane history. What if God, willing to show his power—just his power . . . ?

That is not true. If God exists at all, you cannot think of him except as good, and if he is good, and has made us, you cannot but believe that he accepts, in making us, the responsibility for having done so; that he is prepared, in the day when all things shall be made manifest, to show that he made us for our own good, to refute the decadent's cry, What right had you to bring me into the world? God is therefore our Father in the second sense of Fatherhood, that he not only made us, but provides for us. He couldn't have played with us by giving us a sense of right and wrong, if right and wrong didn't really matter. He couldn't have been so cruel as to make us want eternal life, if he were not prepared to give us eternal life. He couldn't have made a Heaven to reward us and a Hell to punish us, if he didn't give sufficient grace to every one of us to attain the one, if we will, and escape the other. All that there is in the world which is evil must be either the result of human sin, or the means of

human perfection. That is the really great step, that is the really staggering demand which is made of us—to believe in the goodness of God.

God is our Father, since he made us; he is our Father, since he provides for us. But further, he is a true father; he doesn't get tired of us, as a Creator might get tired of his creatures, he pursues us with his love. The son has played truant, turned prodigal, he has asked and received of his father all the inheritance he could hope for, and by his own fault wasted it to no purpose. God doesn't cut him off with a shilling; the ragged tramp at the lodge-gates has forfeited all other claim to consideration, is a different man, to all practical purposes, from the man who set out to make his way in the world, but the fact remains he is a son. That, too, belongs to the goodness of God: at the very moment when he kissed his Master, there was sufficient grace in the heart of Judas to have made repentance possible. Doubtless thou art our Father,

though Abraham be ignorant of us, and Israel acknowledge us not—you can never be too sinful to pray, you can never be too sinful to be prayed for.

Our Father's love is not merely the love of the artist for his work, for that love ceases when the work is finished. Nor is it merely the love of a friend, for a friend's love may be withdrawn when all claim to it lapses; God's love, like woman's love, still clings to what you were, believes in what you might be. But God's love passes even the love of women, for it is given alike to each. It knows nothing of the earthly limitation:

Such love as mine could never brook
A rival on its throne.

God loves you personally, with the same force of desire with which he loves the whole world. That is the secret of Fatherhood; in the innermost sanctuary of timeless existence, in the heart of that light which no man may approach unto, there is

One who loves you as if he had no other children to love, there is a flame which finds its single focus in you. The ubiquity of the Godhead does not simply mean that God is everywhere; it means that in any one place he is as fully present as in all the rest of Creation put together. And the Divine attention is such, that although it is directed everywhere, the whole of it is nevertheless directed towards any single point. When you pray, remember that you are *solus cum solo*, that God is at that moment thinking of *you* individually, paying more attention to you than you are to him.

“When ye pray,” our Saviour commanded his disciples, say “Our Father.” You aren’t to say “Our-Father-which-art-in-Heaven”; you’re to say, “Our Father, which art in Heaven”—the first two words are a manifestation from you of the first disposition requisite to prayer; the acknowledgement of God’s goodness. It tells him that you are not praying blindly, on an off chance, in the hope that it may do some

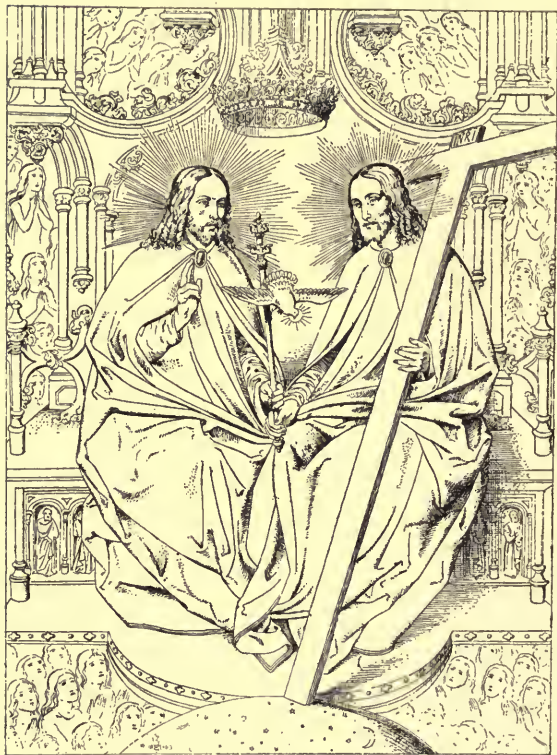
good, and the certainty that it can't do any harm. It confesses that, even without prayer, you have, not all you want, but all you absolutely need. It shows in you a love and confidence that will not be daunted or disturbed if he refuses what you ask. It soothes the tumult of your hopes and passions, before you come to give them expression in his sight: however urgent your need, you have still time to dwell on those first two words, as Jesus himself did when the Agony was upon him, and the torches of his persecutors were already flaring on the hill-side; the sob of emotion must be stilled and disciplined before the true prayer begins. It is a bold avowal you are making, "Thou art my Father": Man and Nature, and the sins of the ages, and the sorrows of the world seem to cry out in contradiction of it—yes, but try for a moment to think without it. Try for a moment to construct for yourself a universe in which God doesn't care. Try to suppose that he ceases to take any interest in us,

when we have offended him ; which of us would then find audience? Or that he hears your voice, but only as a single voice amid the jarring cries of a huge mob of suppliants—is it thinkable? No, you know that the opposite is true. But the consciousness of it must be sunk deep in your heart if your prayer is to be anything but perfunctory. Ten minutes spent, if ten minutes are needed, in making this first simple act of faith, are better spent than ten minutes of impetrative prayer which is not grounded upon that confidence.

“I will not let thee go,” says Jacob in his night vision, “I will not let thee go, except thou bless me,” and God answers, “What is thy name?” and when he hears it, corrects it: “Thou shalt no more be called Jacob, but Israel, for as a prince hast thou power with God and with men.” Your name is perhaps little known to the world, and used, behind your back, in criticism and abuse ; but there is a secret name by which God knows you, and it rings in his


ears with a princely dignity; in all your insignificance, you are still a person to him; in all your weakness, you have still power in his counsels. When prayer seems difficult, try to remember that he knows you by such a name; that all the love and devotion with which you can pronounce the holy Name of Jesus is returned, quite as individually and with far more steadfast purpose, in the unheard whisper with which he calls you, his own sheep, by name.





Omnia tibi possible

Omnia tibi possible

“LL THINGS ARE POSSIBLE WITH THEE.” That is the second avowal we have to make, the second difficulty we have to face, the second ground of confidence we have to proceed on, when we are asking God to give us what we want. Like the goodness of God, the omnipotence of God is not a simple, easy, self-evident proposition that we can merely state, and pass on. In some ways it would be much easier to reconcile our belief in God’s goodness with the facts of the world as they come to us in daily experience, if we could believe that his power is limited; and you will find a constant tendency among those modern theologians who are engaged in trying to whitewash the divine adminis-

tration of the world, to speak as if God were in some way tied down by his own laws, unable to reverse his decisions.

Put the case to yourself for a moment, and you will see what attractions it has: there was a book published only last year which took this idea for its starting-point. Let us suppose that somehow God created the world, and the machinery of the world, and then something went wrong with the works, and the machine got out of hand. Somehow, sin crept into the world, and suffering as the result of sin, and nothing is left now to the Creator of the Universe but to look on helplessly, while men lie and murder and defraud one another, and sin against their own souls, while the weak are oppressed, the poor neglected, the sinners condoned; while war and poverty as the result, earthquake, plague, and famine as the punishment of human misdeeds, claim the wrong victims and leave the true culprits unharmed: he hears our cry, he pities our distress, but—he can do nothing. Some

day, sooner or later, the truant machine will run down through sheer exhaustion: the sun's heat will fail, or some merciful comet will cross our path and destroy every vestige of our loves, our hates, our crimes: and then, in some different order of existence, more amenable to the control of eternal righteousness, the just will be rewarded, and the unjust reprimanded: God will put all things under his feet. But meanwhile, the secular tale of outrage and misery must go on: all that God can do is to influence, through the power of his Son's Incarnation, a few souls here, a few souls there, who will take arms for him and fight the battles in which he is unable to take part: you may blame Adam if you like; you may blame the German Emperor if you like, but you mustn't blame God—God is guiltless, because God is powerless.

Yes, but Jesus says, "Abba, Father, all things are possible with thee." God could have killed the germs that gave birth to that pestilence. God could have arranged,

so that the earthquake shouldn't happen. God could have so ordered the course of nature, that the wind which spread the fire should have come from such a quarter as to quench it. Our minds, of course, are so restricted by the limitations of time, that we naturally think of the course of this world as something preordained by God, preordained, doubtless, for the best, but still preordained and therefore irrevocable. When we pray for a good harvest, says the logician, either it is a year in which God has preordained a good harvest, or it is not: if it is, our prayers were unnecessary, if it is not, they are unavailing. But there is no time with God; if you think of him as winding up the world like a watch when he created it, then you must think of your prayers as being already echoing in his ears, centuries before they were spoken; every whisper, every sigh uttered in front of that tabernacle was recorded from all eternity in the Heart of the Eternal. Or, if you think of God as hearing your prayers now, you must think

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of him as ordering the course of the world now, not changing his mind, but making up his mind from moment to moment, in consideration of the faith, the devotion, the obedience which you manifest in prayer. Omnipotence means, not merely that everything which is done in the world is done by God, but that it is done of his free choice, without any external compulsion whatever.

But, you will say, there is one thing at least in the world which is not so controlled, and that is the free will of Man. God could stay the waterfall in mid-air, could turn the course of the hurricane, could silence the volcano: but he could not change the evil intentions of a human soul. He can thwart the evil designs of the conspirator by the intervention of outward circumstance, he cannot compel the conspirator to will otherwise. No, even that is not true. Your will is free only because from moment to moment he wills it to be free. He could have turned the heart of Judas at the very instant when

he kissed his master, by an irresistible compulsion. He could have transformed a Bismarck into a Gladstone. He does not, it is true, interfere in this way, because it would be contrary to the whole scheme of probation which is his will for us. But even in this sense, God's will is not limited from without.

And although he does not interfere with our wills by compulsion, but only by the persuasive influence of his preventing grace, he still controls the results of our actions from without. He could have smitten Judas with a sudden madness: that would not have saved Judas' soul, but it would have prevented the Crucifixion. And this is the explanation of what seems at first sight a very confusing idea, namely, that the results of evil actions planned by evil human wills, results which take the shape of suffering, temporal loss, and spiritual temptation to others, are not merely in accordance with the will of God, they *are* the will of God. Nothing could be more alien from God's

will than that the Jews should crucify Jesus. Nothing could be more completely in harmony with God's will, than that Jesus should be crucified by the Jews. And therefore, when people object to our saying that the European war was a judgement of God upon our sins, on the ground that it arose from the sinful will of, say, the German Emperor, and God, who wills no evil, therefore had nothing to do with it, we know what to answer. We know that however much the human responsibility for the war be responsibility for a foul crime, God could have prevented, if he had willed to prevent, that crime being carried into execution: he could have struck the German Emperor dead, as he struck Arius the heretic dead, at the moment when his plans seemed to be prospering; he could have annihilated the army before Liége, as he annihilated the army of Sennacherib; he didn't, therefore he willed it—willed that the crime should be allowed to reap its own bitter fruits.

And here is another point to be noticed.

When we take any important resolve, we are accustomed to postpone other plans, to rearrange our whole engagement list to suit it. "I must be at Birmingham on the 28th, therefore I cannot be at Exeter on the 28th, therefore I must scratch my engagement at Exeter; and, let's see, scratching my engagement at Exeter will mean that I can't do the work I meant to do on the 29th, I shall be able, therefore, to do *then* the work I had meant to do on the 30th," and so on. In our experience, in our designs, the details have to be sacrificed to the general scheme. "I am sorry to disappoint you," we say to a friend, "but it was absolutely imperative that I should not disappoint So-and-so: I couldn't help it, you had to be sacrificed." There are no such limitations with God. The occasion never arises when "he cannot help it," when somebody's interests have to be sacrificed for the sake of somebody else. We are not to think of God as a great financier, content to lose a venture here in order that he may bring

off a still greater *coup* there; or as a great general who finds himself forced to allow one battalion to be cut up, in order that he may relieve the pressure upon another part of the line. He didn't allow Barabbas to go free *merely* because the salvation of the world depended on it: he foresaw that, if he would but use his opportunity, the reprieve would be the best thing for Barabbas. He didn't allow St. Thomas of Canterbury to be martyred *merely* because he saw it would lead to the exaltation of his Church; he allowed the martyrdom because that was the way in which he saw fit that St. Thomas should glorify God. And when he allowed a European War to break out, he didn't do it for one single purpose, regardless of the consequences: he foresaw every corollary it would involve; he foresaw how each soldier would fall, what effect that loss would have, or ought to have, upon those who loved him, how every single human soul living in the world would be affected by the upheaval; he foresaw all that, and, as at the

Creation of the world, he pronounced it very good.

God's care of us, God's power over our fortunes, is therefore individual: he is not straitened by circumstances, he does in every case what is for the good of every individual soul. You have seen, perhaps, a puzzle in some monthly magazine, which you have to solve by finding a straight line that will make its way through various obstacles, or by arranging various mathematical figures in a way that will produce a certain pattern. Hour after hour you spend over it, fascinated: if you draw the line here, it will solve this difficulty, but then it will necessarily raise a fresh difficulty there; in removing the fresh difficulty, you have had recourse to an expedient inconsistent with your original solution: and so you go on, until at last the true solution bursts upon you suddenly, and you say, "To be sure! How childishly simple! What a fool I must have been not to see before now that this line, this arrangement, was the only

one that could possibly satisfy all the various requirements of the situation." Well, you know, Heaven will be like that. We shall suddenly see how the purposes of God ran, like a single straight line, fulfilling every need, allowing for every exigency; tested at every point, and at every point found true.

So, when we settle down to our prayers, we have this point, too, to remember. We must begin by gratefully acknowledging God's goodness, we must go on to confess, and to congratulate with him upon, his almighty power. We must remind ourselves beforehand that if this intercession or that remains unanswered, it is not because God has ceased to hold the tiller of Creation; it is not because rebellious human wills come between him and us, and disappoint him of the effect he would otherwise willingly have produced; it is not because his methods are wholesale methods, and he cannot be bothered with details; it is because this was best for us, and if he had seen another

issue to be best for us, though empires should totter, though Nature's laws should be suspended from their action, that other issue would have come about. It needs some faith to believe all that, doesn't it? But try for a moment to believe anything else. Is that omnipotent, which is not omnipotent at every moment? Is that omnipotent, which is not omnipotent in all circumstances? Is that omnipotent, which is not omnipotent at every point? To the materialist, everything is inevitable. To the Christian, nothing is inevitable. There is no way in between.

Jesus kneels in Gethsemane; he appeals to his Father's goodness, and the Angel of the Agony comes to help him, but not to save him, to comfort him, but not to relieve. And still the torches draw nearer. He appeals to his Father's omnipotence, and a thousand thousand legions of angels hover round him, every hand on the scabbard, every faculty eager to obey. And still the torches draw nearer. Can you fancy


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that the three watchers close at hand never wondered why that prayer was unanswered? Surely now, if ever, God will show his power, unless his arm has indeed waxed short . . . but there *is* no answer. We know now, at least in part, why there was no intervention: we know that Peter was waiting to have his faith tested, the penitent thief to be pardoned, Mary to achieve her miracle of compassion, the whole human race to be redeemed. Indeed, the difficulty to us is to see, not why the prayer was never answered, but why the prayer was ever made. Don't you see that some day every unanswered prayer, every blighted hope, every thwarted ambition that once made our faith rock to its very foundations will be explained to us by reasons as simple, as cogent, as satisfying as those? He that spared not his only Son, but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not with him also freely give us all things?



Transfer Calicem hunc

Transfer Calicem hunc

UR SAVIOUR JESUS CHRIST was perfectly good; that is to say, the human Will which he took upon him when he took our flesh was at every moment and in every point, by its own spontaneous choice, perfectly in accord with the Will of God. Further, he possessed knowledge of all things past, present, and to come, not only as God, but also as Man, in so far as these things could be mediated at all by human faculties. How then is it that he can pray, "Take away this Cup"? Is he praying that the Redemption of the world should happen in some other way? But he must know that that cannot be. Can it be, then, that he is praying the Redemption of the world may not happen at all—Jesus Christ praying that you and I

and the whole human race may go to Hell? Or, if he didn't mean that, why did he pray for it? And, if he did pray for it, how was it that God didn't grant it? God, who has promised to grant the petitions of those who ask in his Son's Name? Did Jesus ask without sufficient faith? Or was he asking for something which wasn't good for him? How could Incarnate God do either? And what does it mean, in any case, when Jesus Christ speaks of praying to the Father? Since he is, all the time, the Eternal Son, dwelling in the bosom of the Father, and without him nothing is done that is done by the power of God, why can't he confer the blessing himself, instead of asking his Father to confer it? And how can God pray? And so your brain goes on ringing with echo after echo of intellectual debate, and there's the clock striking, and it's time your meditation finished—and what fruit have you, what worship from you has found its way behind the curtains of the Tabernacle?

Transfer Calicem hunc 31

I think that in this case our profitless speculation arises from the fact that we are accustomed, by a faulty and fatal tendency of our minds, to try and explain the higher in terms of the lower. Thus, a modern sociologist will try to account for the civic activities of man by reference to the habits of bees: he cannot be made to see that the proper course is to account for the habits of bees by reference to the civic activities of man. We try to judge the complete, the formed specimen by what we know of the rudimentary, the imperfect, the embryo, and that is a preposterous procedure. Man as we know him, sinful man, is so warped in a thousand directions by his fall from Paradise, so bound down by a thousand limitations which are proper, not to his true nature, but to the accidents of his terrestrial state, that you must not, you cannot, make his capacity the measure of the Sacred Humanity of Jesus: you must take the Sacred Humanity of Jesus, and make it the measure of the full stature of man. And in

this case, you must not say, This is how I pray, therefore this is how Jesus must have prayed. You must say, This is how Jesus prayed, therefore this is how I ought to be praying.

The true secret to grasp about prayer is this, that in proportion as your will is what it should be—and the Will of Jesus was perfect—every need of which you become conscious, every wish that is formed into your heart, is instantaneously translated into an aspiration towards God, transformed in the light of your continual intimate communion with him: desires turn into prayers, just as surely, just as naturally, as the incense thrown on the live charcoal finds its expression, and ascends, in smoke. You know how, if you are in a very bad temper, with some permanent grievance at the back of your mind, every little worry that happens to you during the day—when the window won't shut properly, when the fire won't burn, when your pipe won't draw, when you drop a stitch, when the soup is

cold—every little worry like that jars upon your jangled nerves, and becomes the occasion for a fresh outburst of irritation; the grasshopper has become a burden, the whole day is coloured for you by the original frame of mind in which you started it. Just so, if you are living continually with God, every affection, every desire, every thought, takes its colour from that holy relationship, and, under its influence, takes to itself the wings of prayer.

Jesus in his Agony saw, and foresaw, all the sins and all the ingratitude of the whole world. He saw the heart of Judas black with treachery, he saw his chosen disciples already sleeping at the hour of crisis, and ready to desert him at the hour of peril; he saw the fanatical hatred of the Jews, the cynical hardness of Pilate, the frivolous injustice of Herod: he saw down the long avenues of the unborn future, wars and crimes and foul passions, hypocrisy, oppression, and wrong: he saw the schisms that would tear the body of his Church, the

heresies that would lead wanderers away from his fold : he saw Tyburn, and Louvain, and the streets of London at midnight—all mirrored in the prophetic Chalice of Gethsemane. He saw it, and all his desires, thwarted by human wills, for human salvation and perfection, turned to prayer in the crucible of his burning Heart, and went up in agony to God.

But, you say, the prayer was never granted. Here is Almighty God wasting his time. Was it wasted? Surely, as the desires turned into prayer, so the prayer turned into grace—a flowing tide of grace that surged up, eddy after eddy, into the hearts of a Judas, a Caiaphas, a Pilate, broke itself against the hard rock of their stony wills, and fell back, but with force undiminished : with force undiminished entered the coward soul of Peter, forced him to his knees, and converted him into the stablisher of his brethren, washed away the sins of the penitent thief, and bore him into Paradise. The prayers of Jesus are

meritorious, because they are the prayers of a human will, not one of them is unheard, not one unanswered.

That is the perfect prayer; but our prayers are imperfect; we do not possess, or possess only in a very limited degree, this faculty of continual aspiration towards God. Prayer, therefore, to us, is not a continuous state, but an occasional exercise, demanding of us the setting apart of special time, the putting out of special spiritual energy. And, just as the poor man, because he is poor, is anxious to make certain that he is getting full value for his money, so we, in our spiritual poverty, like to be assured that there is some return for our grudging expenditure, and want to be informed how that expenditure can be most profitably laid out. In the first place, I think we must remind ourselves that there is in the constitution of things a certain margin, a certain otherwise indeterminate element, upon which our prayers operate. Everybody who believes in free will must admit that

God didn't make the world once for all a mere machine; he left freedom to human wills to influence, through the medium of human action, the course of his creation. If Cæsar, if Gregory, if Napoleon had not acted in such and such a way, such and such a thing would not have happened. In the same way, if we are to give any value or any meaning to the promises our Saviour attached to the practice of impetrative prayer, we must believe that God left a further freedom to human wills, to influence the course of his Creation, not directly by the medium of their actions, but indirectly, through his mercy, by the medium of their prayers. You do not, you dare not say, "This temptation must have overcome me, whether I had consented to it or not." Very well then, you need not, you dare not say, "That bullet would have taken that precise course, whether I had prayed or not."

But, you may say, if our prayers are not made useless by the unswerving operation of God's power—I will grant that—surely

they are made useless by the Providential overruling of his goodness. You have told me already that God always does precisely the thing that is best for my ultimate welfare, and the welfare of those I love, in every case. If that is so, surely what I am praying for is either what is best for me, in which case God will give it me anyhow ; or it is not what is best for me, and therefore no entreaties of mine will induce him to bestow it. "O Zeus, our King," says the old heathen epigram, "grant us what is good for us whether we pray, or whether we forbear ; and what is harmful deny us, though we pray for it never so earnestly." It is a pretty conceit, but does it not rather strike at the roots of impetrative prayer ?

Here I think we must divide very sharply between temporal and spiritual blessings. In the case of spiritual blessings, there is no great difficulty, for whereas it is of faith that God gives every soul sufficient grace for its salvation, it is not hard to imagine that over and above that sufficiency he gives

more or less grace in response to more or less prayer. There could not, possibly, have been a moment in the life of Saint Augustine in which he could not, if he would, have repented; but that does not mean that the tears of Monica were of no avail. But in the case of our worldly happiness or prosperity, we must suppose that there is no one course of life, thought out in all its details, which will be absolutely and necessarily best for us; the possible comforts and advantages which may fall to our lot are such that prayer may win them for us, lack of prayer may lose them for us, and yet neither the winning nor the losing of them affects, in any serious degree, our spiritual welfare. If prosperity brings with it special dangers, or adversity holds out special opportunities for mortification and the practice of submission, then and then only God mercifully thrusts our prayers aside—not censuring them as presumptuous, for he knows our frailty, but reminding us that his grace is sufficient.

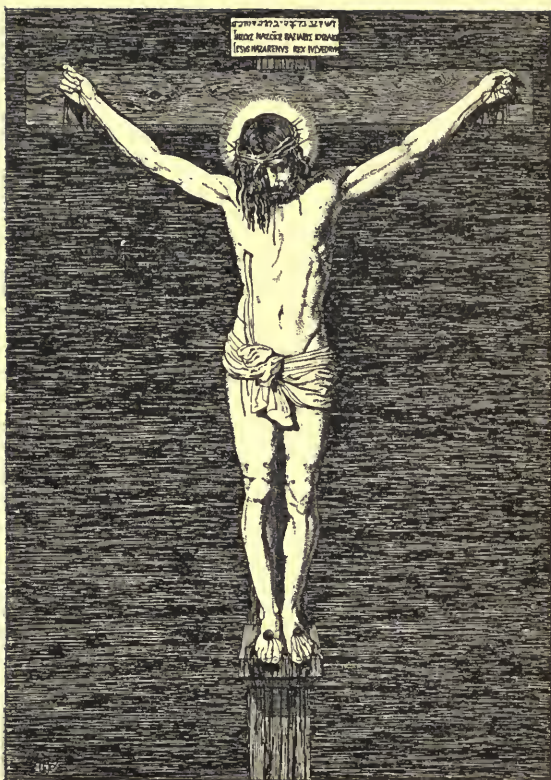
Transfer Calicem hunc 39

But if he does deny our prayers, in fatherly Providence? Or if our prayers for the conversion of others, or some special grace for them, are made of none effect through the hardness of human hearts, what becomes, we ask, of the long vigil, the patient sacrifice of devotion? Are these all wasted? At least they are not wasted altogether: for prayer is a meritorious action, its claim upon God's favour is in proportion to the merit of the devotion it elicits from us; and all merit has its treasury in Heaven. When you pray, the answer to your prayer consists, partly, in merit acquired by yourself, partly in an addition, however small, to the great sum of merit which God places at the disposal of his Church; only a certain part of the fruit of it is ear-marked, so to speak, for the particular intention for which it was offered. And although we have no sure warrant of revelation about it, I do not think we need even suppose that this special intention is wasted, when for some reason it cannot take its literal effect. Do you ever

think of the people who have very few to pray for them, few friends, few acquaintances, few friends or acquaintances who use the habit of prayer? I sometimes wonder if our unanswered prayers (as we think them) are not placed to the credit of such forgotten soldiers in the battle of life: you will remember that the talent bestowed on the unworthy servant, who could make no use of it, was at the Lord's disposal to give to another. Suppose that you are praying for the soul of one now dead, who secretly, unknown to you, spent his whole life in deliberate revolt against God, and refusal of his inspirations—one whom your prayers cannot avail to help. It may be—I say, it may be—that your prayers are winning refreshment, light, and peace, for some poor misjudged penitent who was thought to have cut himself off from God in life, and died by his own hand, who now, in the place of waiting, remembers gratefully the prayers you, who never knew him, are offering for his sake.

Transfer Calicem hunc 41

If I have been unduly dry and theological in these considerations, it is because I am convinced that the lack of a clear faith in the real efficacy of individual prayer is at the bottom of a good deal of that haphazard indevotion with which we run through a list of names, slightly known to us, a good deal of that frantic impatience in intercession which mars—for it is impatience—something of the perfectness of our intercession for those we love best, in their most need. It is right that we should ask questions—the sinless Mother could ask, “Son, why hast thou thus dealt with us?”—but when we have asked the question, we must look steadily upon the perfection of the Divine Nature, the unforgetting Love, the indefectible Power, and find in the contemplation of it the necessary answer to our doubts. Jesus is about our Father’s business, when he hides his Face.



Non quod Ego

Non quod Ego

NEVERTHELESS, NOT WHAT I WILL, BUT WHAT THOU WILT. It is not a question of what I will, but of what thou wilt. Whether I will it or not, is not the point; the point is, Does my Father will it, or no? That is the interpretation we must keep in mind, if we are to understand the theology of the Agony; it is not a conflict between the Will of Jesus and the Will of God, from which the latter emerges successful, it is the Will of Jesus passing beyond itself, being universalized into the Will of God. A great deal of very loose doctrine is preached on this text: you will find it suggested, for example, that it was the human Will of Jesus of Nazareth which willed to live, and then the divine Will, which he possessed as the Eternal Word of God, came in to correct it. That

is theological heresy and psychological nonsense. It is true, of course, that there is in our animal nature an instinct for self-preservation, which some have called the Will to Live. No doubt that repugnance of nature to the idea of death, which tugs a little at the resolution of the bravest of earthly heroes, was operative in the Sacred Humanity of Jesus, and formed a background of horror to the mental Passion of Gethsemane. But that is an instinct, not a will; the Will of Jesus, as a function of the soul, was at that moment, as at every other moment in his life on earth, perfectly in accord with that of his Father. Jesus did not will the Crucifixion, did not will that Judas should betray, Caiaphas conspire against, and Pilate misjudge him—nor did the Father. God never wills what is evil. The Father did will the Passion, did will that Jesus should receive the kiss, stand before the tribunal, tread the way of the Cross, without complaining—so did Jesus. Jesus always willed what was good.

If anything, I would say it was the Divine Will which said, "Take away this Cup," the human Will which said, "Nevertheless not what I will." "Take away this Cup"—there speaks the desire in the Heart of the Eternal for the salvation of his Creatures, a desire balked by their own sin. "Not what I will"—there speaks the Sacred Humanity; the Son addresses the Father in the form of a servant. For his human Will, though perfect as yours and mine are not, was particular like yours and mine; it embraced one object at a time, as a human will must—if you desire, for example, that a friend may be preserved from bodily death, and that his soul may be saved from temptation, there are two acts of desire there, not one. The Will of God is like a great chord of music; the human will is an instrument which can only play one note at a time; our business is to see that the note it plays is the right note, the note which will contribute its proper share to that symphony of aspiration which would rise,

if we were perfect, from the orchestra of humanity into the ears of God.

Now, the mistake we generally make when we speak of the resignation of our wills to God in prayer, is that we think of it as something which happens only when our prayers aren't granted, when God, in his merciful foreknowledge, sees fit to correct our prayers, and deny us the actual blessing we asked for. But that is only a very small part of the subject; we ought to try and practise the prayer of resignation, even in cases when we know we are asking for what God wills; for example, the eternal salvation of one we love. God wants that to happen, wants it much more than you do; but you can still say, Not my will, but thine be done. You wish for the salvation of that soul, perhaps in a more or less selfish way, because you want to meet in Heaven; perhaps in a rather less selfish way, because you are so fond of the person in question that you desire his spiritual good entirely for his own sake. But there is a higher motive

still, which the prayer of resignation inculcates; you should try to pray, May this thing be done, not because I will it, though indeed I do will it, but because thou, my God, willest it. You should try to think, not of your own anxiety, nor even of your friend's danger, but of the vacant place at the marriage supper, the heavenly mansion, bought with the price of the Saviour's blood, standing empty through the rebellion of a human soul, one less jewel in Christ's diadem, one less voice of praise among the ransomed round the throne. That is what is meant by resigning your will to the will of God. You have to try and rise from a particular desire for the good of So-and-so to a universal desire for the greater glory of God.

And that is the true answer to a scruple that assails most of us, I suppose, at one time or another, about our own intercessions. Here am I, you say to yourself, spending half my time praying for a mere handful of people, my friends, and another quarter praying for a few scores of people, my

acquaintances, my benefactors, the people I have led into sin, those who have asked for my prayers, a favourite Church, a favourite mission, here and there, and only a bare quarter of my time, if that, is left for the needs of the rest of Creation. Now I know—for my Saviour has assured me of it—that these prayers of mine are granted by God in the sense in which they are offered, except where the granting of them would be harmful, or prejudicial to a higher good: I am therefore winning more grace for my own special little corner of Creation than for anyone else. Are my prayers as universal as God would like them to be? Why can't I be more like the Curé d'Ars, weeping all day for the impenitent sinners, offering to God my sleepless nights for the benefit of the souls in Purgatory?

And we try as a rule to satisfy that scruple by joining various associations for special intercession, taking in quantities of little magazines with prayer-sheets let into them, and lengthening our morning or

evening prayers with a whole string of Collects—quite apart from the still more embarrassing obligation of the Collects we have to say once a week. Instead of praying merely for our own friends, we pray for all sorts of anonymous people, for two church workers, for three district visitors, for one in trouble, for six in even worse trouble, and so on, with a sort of desperate feeling that we must do our bit. Now, I don't say a word against such forms of devotion for those who really find them natural, and are able to use them with a feeling of spiritual profit; thank God, there are many such. But I think it is a fatal mistake for people to whom they are not either natural or profitable to make it a point of conscience to use them, and feel scruples when they have omitted a name here or a collect there. For if you are doing that, you are really making for yourself a sort of devotional bolt-hole: you are trying to escape the reproach of praying only for particular people by praying for other lists of particular

people—what you really want to do is to will with your whole will the whole Will of God. The people who write and ask for prayers aren't the only people who need prayers: probably those who don't ask need them far more. What you really want to pray for is that every soul shall so live as to give the greatest amount possible of glory to the Father who created it.

To will with your whole will the whole Will of God; that is perfect prayer; that was the prayer of Jesus. And if you were living in a religious house, worldly affections put behind you, worldly distractions shut out from you, you would be able to do something like that. But you are, at present, living in the world; you have got ties and affections which bind you to other creatures, and it's useless to pretend that you haven't. Your thoughts, particularly at times of stress and anxiety, do recur, whether you will it or no, to particular people, particular objects you have at heart. Well, it may seem cowardly advice; but I would say, go on:

go on praying for those people, those objects, and not—unless you really find you derive spiritual profit from the exercise—for fresh people, fresh objects. Remember that, as I said yesterday, it is only a part even of your most private intercessions which is applied to a special intention: the whole church of God is benefited when any little girl prays for a new doll. Go on praying for your own special intentions, the ones that mean most to you; but do not forget to confess the imperfection of those prayers, do not cease to aspire towards a form of prayer which will be a more full expression in your will of the Will of God.

God's Will is for all alike; therefore, when you pray for a friend in any pressing need, think not merely of that one, but of hundreds of others who are in the same position. You have a friend whose first Confession is to be made this Easter; ask grace for him; but ask grace, while you are about it, for all those who now for the first time have coveted the blessings, and under-

taken the responsibilities, which attach to the Sacrament of penance. You have a friend who is wounded ; think of him as he lies in hospital, but think also of the long rows of beds on either side of his, of the other patients, indistinguishable almost under the bandages : pray for them. You ask refreshment, light, and peace, for a soul in prison : think of the other Holy Souls, too, especially those who departed from their bodies at the same time ; try to make your special intentions not so much a prayer for a separate individual, as an instance designed to bring home to you the needs of a whole class of God's suffering Creation.

And, while you try to make the scope of your prayers wider, try also to make the motive deeper. Look at the world more and more, as he gives you grace to do it, from God's standpoint. There is no reason why you should cease to intercede for the temporal prosperity of your friends, so long as you find that thoughts of their happiness, ambitions for their future, anxiety for their

safety, take a prominent place in your mind ; do not crush the thoughts, but translate them into prayer. Only, while you do so, make a practice of demanding spiritual blessings at the same time for the same people ; if they have not known God, pray for their conversion ; if they know him only at a distance, for their instruction ; if they know and love him, for their final perseverance and perfection in holiness. And remember meanwhile, not merely that they want God, but that God wants them ; the Christian must not be satisfied, so long as there is a note wanting in the harmony of creation's praise, a niche empty in the architecture of the Heavenly City.

I hope I have said enough in these four days to show that if we believe in our holy Faith, if we are prepared to take our Saviour's words at their face value, the practice of prayer is not merely a sentimental indulgence of our emotions, or an effort to put ourselves in tune with an impersonal Infinite. Prayer, impetrative prayer, is based

upon the confidence that God is at once all-good and all-powerful; that he gives us sufficient grace for all our spiritual needs, and is prepared to give us more; that he orders the course of our temporal affairs in such a way as will conduce to our final perfection, and can be prevailed upon, by our intercessions, to increase even our earthly happiness if the increase of it be not contrary to our own good; that prayer, being a meritorious act, justly wins from God's mercy blessings both for us and for the whole Church, and for those in particular for whom we pray in particular, unless overruling Providence forbids it, or their own failure to correspond with the Divine grace makes it inoperative; that even prayers which are not granted are not therefore wasted; that the highest form of prayer is that in which the human will becomes, of its own motion, an expression and an instrument of the divine. We ought never to force ourselves to the practice of impetrative prayer, if we find that com-

munion with God is a more direct form, without any earthly images or earthly considerations, is more natural to us and more proper to our state of spiritual progress; for all prayer is meritorious, and therefore all prayer is impetrative. But while the common fortunes of humanity are close to us and continually present to our thoughts, let us not despise the simplest petitions, so long as they afford an opportunity for aspiration towards God: Mary prayed for wine. When by God's mercy we receive a fuller revelation in Heaven, there will be many of the prayers we have uttered we shall think better of, I do not think there will be many we shall regret. None, certainly, in which we have followed our Saviour's example, and prefaced them with an acknowledgement of God's fatherly love and his irresistible power, in which we have humbly confided our desires to him, and aspired, through the means of them, to will with our whole will his whole Will, who created us.



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